Research Article

The Politics of Visibility: Women's Agency and State Power in *Persepolis*

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Abstract

This paper argues that Persepolis 1: The Story of a Childhood *critiques patriarchal religious control in ways that echo the ideas posited by liberal feminism. It treats women's agency as the ability to choose, to act, and to be visible in public. Satrapi shows how the Islamic Republic turns women's bodies into political symbols. The veil is not presented as a private religious practice, rather it is imposed by the state. It is enforced through schools, street patrols, and public shaming. Marji experiences this control in everyday life. She is judged for her clothes, her hair, and her behaviour. Even music and fashion become "evidence" of moral failure. These scenes show how the public sphere is structured to limit women's movement and self-expression. The book also shows how patriarchy uses fear and sexualised language to discipline girls. At the same time, Satrapi does not reduce the story to a simple clash between "the West" and "Islam." Marji is religious as a child. The target is not faith itself. The target is an authoritarian system that claims to speak for faith. By the end of the volume, Marji's resistance is not heroic in a grand sense. It is daily and personal. She tries to keep her dignity. She keeps speaking. She keeps choosing. In that sense,* Persepolis 1 *presents agency as autonomy under pressure, and as the right to exist publicly without coercion.*

Keywords: *Feminism, autonomy, emancipation.*

Introduction

Marjane Satrapi was born in 1969 in Tehran. As a child, she would have discussions on issue pertaining to religion and politics which shaped her worldview. It was also during her childhood that the Shah of Iran was overthrown and subsequently the Islamic Republic of Iran was set up. Her parents supported the revolution's initial ideals, but soon became critical of its authoritarian turn. Satrapi was sent to Europe as a teenager, this experience of living abroad sharpened her understanding of female experience and difference from other western women was highlighted. She wrote *Persepolis* in 2000, and it was first published in France. Here, she uses the perspective of a child to critically comment on the changes in Iranian society in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution. The work is a graphic novel, as she fuses personal memory with the political events of the time.

Review of Literature

Early criticism of *Persepolis* has celebrated it as a feminist coming of age narrative that highlights the gendered violence of the Iranian state. Hillary Chute reads Satrapi's work as a form of graphic witnessing that makes women's political suffering visible through embodied storytelling. Chute argues that the graphic form allows Satrapi to link private experience with public history, especially in scenes of schooling, veiling, and surveillance (Chute 96). This reading positions *Persepolis* as a text that powerfully documents the erosion of women's autonomy under revolutionary authoritarianism.

Other critics, however, have raised concerns about the politics of representation in *Persepolis*. Nima Naghibi argues that the memoir risks analysing this work within Western frameworks that equate Muslim women's oppression solely with Islam. According to Naghibi, Satrapi's emphasis on veiling and state violence can unintentionally reinforce Islamophobic assumptions when detached from historical and geopolitical context (Naghibi 231). These arguments suggest that *Persepolis* cannot be treated as a universal account of Iranian women's lives.

Postcolonial feminist theory has further complicated the text's feminist claims. Chandra Talpade Mohanty warns against Western feminist narratives that universalise women's oppression and erase cultural difference. Mohanty's critique argues that liberation cannot be exclusively seen through secular visibility and individual choice (Mohanty 63). From this perspective, the memoir risks marginalising alternative feminist practices that do not align with liberal norms.

Saba Mahmood's work on agency provides a crucial theoretical intervention in this debate. In *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood challenges the assumption that agency must take the form of resistance to power. She argues that ethical self formation within religious frameworks can also constitute agency, even when it appears as submission (Mahmood 15).

Together, these critics show that *Persepolis 1* sits at the intersection of feminism, postcolonial politics, and global discourse on Islam. Existing scholarship has highlighted its narrative power as well as its limitations. This paper builds on these debates by focusing on how Satrapi represents agency as unstable and politically mediated, rather than as a simple expression of personal freedom.

The Iranian Revolution and the Politics of Intervention

Any revolution or regime change is a result of or a reaction to the forces that came before it. Similarly, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 did not emerge in isolation. It was shaped by decades of foreign intervention and authoritarian rule. Political oppression was a concomitant vice of authoritarian rule. A key moment was the 1953 coup against Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Declassified documents later confirmed that the coup was orchestrated by the CIA and Britain's MI6 in response to Mossadegh's attempt to nationalise Iran's oil industry (Kinzer 122). After this, the Shah was reinstated with Western support, and his regime became increasingly dependent on the United States for military, economic, and political backing.

Under the Shah, Iran underwent rapid modernisation, and this process was hailed by liberal westerns. But this process was uneven and coercive. Political dissent was brutally suppressed by SAVAK, the secret police trained and supported by the CIA. While the Shah promoted secularism and Westernisation, many Iranians experienced these reforms as imposed from above and detached from social justice. Ansari argues that the revolution was bloodless and the reforms were conceived as a way to increase their power, and reduce the influence of religious authorities (1). As Ervand Abrahamian notes, the Shah's state combined "modernising rhetoric with authoritarian practice," leaving little room for political participation (134). By the late 1970s, opposition to the regime united religious leaders, leftist groups, students, and ordinary citizens.

The revolution that followed was not initially a theocratic movement. It was a broad uprising against dictatorship and foreign influence. Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership gained prominence in the aftermath, particularly as the new regime consolidated power. The Islamic Republic that emerged, however, perceived resistance in terms of religion. However, as scholars such as Hamid Dabashi argue, the revolutionary promise of freedom was soon replaced by a new system of control, especially over women's bodies and public life (Dabashi 45). Mandatory veiling and moral policing became symbols of the state's authority, although justified as cultural and religious principles but ultimately enforced through law and violence.

Discussion

Feminism is an umbrella term which is a theory and a movement advocates for equality between the sexes and freedom for women. However, female experiences are not universal and therefore there are many feminisms. Western liberal feminism places individual freedom and equality at the centre of its political and ethical framework. It defines women's oppression primarily as the result of restrictions on choice, bodily autonomy, and access to public life. When read through this lens, *Persepolis I* appears as a powerful narrative of feminist awakening under authoritarian rule. Satrapi's memoir traces the gradual dwindling of women's agency in post-revolutionary Iran and frames resistance as the assertion of individual will against religious and political coercion.

Western feminism is a product of liberal political theory, which treats the individual as the primary unit of moral and political concern. Within this framework, freedom is defined in terms of autonomy, equality before the law, and the capacity to make meaningful choices without coercion. Simone de Beauvoir's argument that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" locates women's oppression in social structures that deny them subjecthood and autonomy (Beauvoir 267). Similarly, Martha Nussbaum argues that oppression emerges from the denial of basic human capabilities, particularly bodily integrity, mobility, and political participation. For Nussbaum, a society is unjust if women lack "the freedom to choose a life one has reason to value" (Nussbaum 74). Across these theoretical formulations, women's oppression is understood primarily as a constraint on choice and access to public life. Thus, practices that limit bodily autonomy or do not allow women to refuse are treated not as alternative ethical choices, but as forms of domination and oppression.

Debates on veiling and women's agency have long been divided over how freedom should be understood. Liberal feminist frameworks see the veil as a visible sign of oppression as they argue that emancipation comes from bodily

visibility in public spaces. From this perspective, unveiling is often read as liberation. Critics such as Susan Moller argue that certain cultural practices are clearly harmful to women and therefore incompatible with gender equality (Okin 16). This position, however, has been challenged by Third World and postcolonial feminists. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that such approaches tend to construct the "Third World woman" as a singular figure defined by lack and victimhood, ignoring differences shaped by history and power (Mohanty 65). She argues that must resist universal models of freedom and attend instead to context, specificity, and lived experience.

The question of agency becomes more complex when examined through the politics of veiling. Saba Mahmood challenges the assumption that agency must always take the form of resistance to social norms. She argues that agency may also be expressed through ethical self formation within religious traditions, noting that "the meaning of agency cannot be fixed in advance" (Mahmood 14). In post-revolutionary Iran, women's bodies became sites where opposing political meanings were imposed. The state enforces veiling as a marker of religious and national identity, whereas global feminist discourse often sees veiling as a sign of oppression and lack of choice. In both cases, women's choices are shaped by power rather than pure free will. As Lila Abu-Lughod observes, focusing solely on the veil risks obscuring "the complex historical and political forces that shape women's lives" (Abu-Lughod 788).

The story starts with the state's imposition of veil, which the author sees as a violation of personal freedom. Satrapi argues that the veil was suddenly imposed when she was in school, but most of the students felt compelled to wear it, however there is very little understanding of the rationale behind it. She says, "We didn't really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn't understand why we had to" (3). This is in sync with the western ideas regarding the universal desire for personal freedom. The veil is imposed not as a result of an inward spiritual understanding but an imposition by the government. Susan Moller Okin argues that there is no cultural justification for the practices which restrict a woman's freedom and bodily autonomy cannot be justified on the basis of being cultural practices. She says that these restrictions go against gender equality. She writes that "a culture that restricts women's liberty in fundamental ways cannot be defended in the name of multiculturalism" (Okin 16). Thus, Satrapi's depiction of veiling and the questions she raises in the text clearly aligns with a liberal feminist critique of patriarchal control.

The classroom scenes are indicative of this liberal feminist lens that is used to interpret the practice of wearing veils by young girls in school. The veil is shown as awkward and students are confused that all of a sudden they are forced to wear it. Girls play with it, misuse it, and thus subvert the use it is meant for. The state claims that veiling will impose a moral discipline on the students; however the way it is worn undermines the dictates of the state. The veil becomes a symbol of arbitrary control and discipline for young girls who do not understand its repercussions. They are too young to reason and give consent to this practice. Liberal feminism treats consent as central to ethical legitimacy. The absence of consent here renders the practice oppressive by definition.

As Marji grows older, restrictions on women's bodies are further intensified and the rules concerning clothes are expanded to include a wide range of practices forbidding women not to reveal their clothing and hair. Their posture also becomes a subject of surveillance. One of the most frequently cited scenes involves Marji being stopped by the Guardians of the Revolution:

> "The Guardians of the Revolution surrounded me.
>
> 'Your trousers are too tight.'
>
> 'Your jacket is too short.'
>
> 'Your veil is badly worn.'" (133)

From a liberal feminist perspective, this scene shows how only the bodies of women are disciplined to enforce a gender hierarchy. Patriarchy has often treated women as conduits and bearers to carry male honour and moral purity. Martha Nussbaum argues that political systems which treat women as bearers of moral purity rather than as autonomous citizens reduce them to instruments of ideology. Such systems deny women "central human capabilities," including bodily integrity and freedom of expression (Nussbaum 33). In *Persepolis*, the female body becomes a public object regulated by male authority, which prevents them any freedom or agency.

Resistance in *Persepolis* often takes the form of personal choice. Marji listens to Western music, wears denim jackets, and adopts styles that signal her individuality and a desire not to be defined by social norms. These acts of self expression reflect a subject possessing agency. Simone de Beauvoir famously argues that woman must reject imposed roles and assert herself as a subject rather than an object. She writes, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" through due to the social constraints imposed on women due to culture and religion (Beauvoir 267). However, *Persepolis* also reveals that individual resistance has its limits. Marji's choices are repeatedly punished and she is threatened by fear of surveillance which further inhibits her freedom. According to Satrapi, religion is used as an instrument of oppression for women. Satrapi uses her voice in the narrative to depict religious authority as hypocritical or violent. Initially her

relationship with God is one of solace as she has conversations with God, but eventually as the violence and oppression by the Islamic state increases, her relationship with God dwindles, as she says,

> I was lost.
>
> I no longer felt anything.
>
> God had left me." (70)

This moment can be read as a form of emancipation from patriarchal religion. As a child she has conversations with God, but gradually the figurehead of God disappears from the graphic novel which can be seen as a sign of her growing rational awareness of the politics of religion. Religion, once personal, eventually becomes a conduit for repression and control. And western scholars argue that religious tenets are in need of revision so that they can grant rights and agency to women. Nussbaum argues that when religious doctrine conflicts with gender equality, the latter must take priority in public life (Nussbaum 52). Thus, this narrative is celebrated as a text which espouses the values posited by Western liberal feminist critics as it exposes the dangers of religious fundamentalism for women. The memoir in a way stakes claim to the fact that in order for women to have agency, the nation should be secular, and there should be legal equality between men and women.

Women's bodies become a battleground for control and signification. Marji says, "In no time, the way people dressed became an ideological sign" (75), arguing that the way women dressed in Iran, whether they veil or they stand opposed to it, reflects their allegiances for the politics rulers of the time. But curiously, Satrapi is trying to show that controlling women's bodies is a way to control the whole social order. The justification given by the regime is that the veil will "protect women from all potential rapists" (74), signifies the fact that institutions try to justify male violence arguing that it results from immodest clothing. This argument absolves men from all moral responsibility.

Marji and her encounter reveal that patriarchy is enforced not only by men, but also by women deputised by the state. When the Guardians confront Marji, the language they use is explicitly sexualized. They shame her by saying, "Lower your scarf, you little whore!" (133), in an effort to discipline anyone who does not confirm to the sartorial choices imposed by the regime. Even keeping your headscarf can become a sign of moral deviance and corruption. Thus, Satrapi critiques patriarchal governance, she challeneges the idea that women's sexuality is inherently dangerous and thus needs to be controlled.

Marj likes western pop culture and the songs of Michael Jackson. In a normal time, it would not be viewed as resistance, however, in the times that Marj witnesses, her taste for the songs of Michael Jackson becomes a political flashpoint and a symbol of resistance as she says, "What do I see here? Michael Jackson? That symbol of decadence?" (133). Thus, resistance does not mean going for protests or a certain ideology, but it also means the freedom to make choices everyday, what to wear, what to listen to, how to speak. Thus, Satrapi is suggesting that the personal can also be highly political.

The protagonist, Marji's desire to be herself, dress as she wants to is at odds with the dicatates of the regime, and out of fear of being jailed, she adheres to the commands of the regime when she is outside her house. However, once indoors, she exercises choice and agency, but reveals that this "double life" where her generation is living with "one identity inside the and another outside" (272) which is created because of the fear of the moral police. This pressure for "performance" is a means of survival in a highly policed world. The graphic novel also brings to fore the practice of marrying women prisoners before executing them. She mentions that since it was forbidden to kill virgins, the prisoners were sexually violated before their execution. Satrapi criticises this practice which reduces female bodies to sheer objects which can be mistreated by the patriarchal mal authority to confirm to some absurd dictates.

It is important to highlight that Satrapi does not treat Marji as non-religious. She is described as a religious person till the time she rationalizes that religion is being used by the state to oppress women. Thus, Persepolis critiques patriarchal religious control but does not suggest that liberation or embracing liberal ideas means abandoning faith. Here she is targeting the control of religion by the Islamic state.

Another example of the author's espousal of Western Feminism is Marji's coming-of-age moment. This is represented as an act of agency as she claims adulthood in a world which is trying to keep her oppressed and voiceless. She says, "With this first cigarette, I kissed childhood goodbye. Now I was a grown-up" (117). Western feminism centres the idea that women become political subjects by claiming autonomy over their own choices. Satrapi stages that autonomy not as abstract theory but as a risky, embodied act by a teenage girl under authoritarian moral regulation.

Conclusion

Persepolis 1 ends by making a simple argument feel urgent: in a patriarchal religious state, a girl's body becomes a public battleground. Marji learns this through ordinary things like how she dresses, how she walks, what she listens to, what she says back. Each choice is read as ideology. Each visible detail is policed. The veil, the "morality" rules, and the street patrols do not merely regulate faith. They regulate women's presence. Satrapi's critique is persistent with liberal feminism because agency is shown as something exercised through autonomy in daily life, not as a slogan but as practice. To be seen, to move, to speak, and to decide becomes political.

At the same time, Satrapi avoids a neat "West equals freedom" conclusion. The book's final turn, sending Marji away, shows the cost of agency under coercion. Yet the moral centre remains clear. Marji's growth is measured by her refusal to disappear into compliance. She insists on a self that cannot be reduced to "modesty," "honour," or obedience. In this sense, *Persepolis* echoes a liberal feminist emphasis on choice and public visibility, but it grounds that emphasis in lived danger. Ultimately, *Persepolis I* offers a powerful case study for Western liberal feminism.

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